

Migration in Relation
To
Alabama Agriculture

by
P. O. Davis

1940

AU
HD5856
.U6D3

3

U26

JUL 20 '53

Morelock

AC

HD5856

46D3

SEP 12 '68

DENDY

MIGRATION IN RELATION TO ALABAMA AGRICULTURE

(Statement by P. O. Davis, director, Extension Service, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, prepared for the special Congressional committee investigating interstate migration of destitute citizens, meeting in Montgomery, Alabama, August 14-16, 1940)

--- 0 ---

History reveals impressively that migration is caused by a desire of the migrant to find better opportunities. He may, therefore, be trying to get away from undesirable conditions, or he may be moving from conditions that are desirable to conditions that are more desirable. Farmers, for example, move from a farm of fair value to one that is better as they see it. In the main, however, people who have been reasonably secure in their income and in their tenure of location have not been inclined to move. They have enjoyed stability.

Good examples of the causes of migration are found in Alabama history. As early as 1815 there was a shifting of population from the Atlantic seaboard states of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia into what was then called the Southeast^{WEST}, including what is now Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. These early migrants were searching for better opportunities for producing cotton, the price of which from 1815 to 1819 varied from 25 cents to 30 cents a pound.

Since the bottom lands along streams of water and then the black lands of Central Alabama and the red lands of the Tennessee Valley were much more desirable than the rolling Piedmont lands of Georgia and the Carolinas for producing cotton with either slave or free labor, the seaboard farmers had a strong desire to move into Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Furthermore, bad management of land and erosion had already rendered almost worthless many thousands of acres in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Where this had occurred farmers were getting away from undesirable soil and seeking new and fertile soil.

184250

Cotton Gin a Factor

The invention of the cotton gin in 1790, which was this Nation's first epoch-making invention, had enlarged opportunities for the production of cotton, for which Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana possessed good land, favorable climate, and adequate rainfall.

During those antebellum days there was a certain amount of intrastate migration -- from the river bottoms to the black belt and also to the hills. Much of the Alabama Black Belt was settled between 1830 and 1840. By 1850 there was a substantial antebellum exodus of planters to new lands across the Mississippi River. One cotton crop after another on the same land soon decreased production per acre wherever it was practiced and, therefore, Alabama farmers who themselves had moved from the seaboard, or had come with their parents, moved on to Arkansas, Texas, Missouri, and a few as far away as Arizona in search of new lands, or for better opportunities than they had at home.

Most of the antebellum intrastate migration from 1820 to 1860 was by small farmers who were either non-slave holders or owned one or two slaves. They moved from place to place, trying to better their conditions. In most cases they were forced by richer landlords from the good lands to the poor lands. These larger landowners were in a stronger position financially and were usually able to buy lands from the smaller farmers when they wanted to do so. These early migrants, incidentally, became the nucleus of our modern agricultural migrants.

The Civil War was the dividing line between the first and the second period of Alabama migration. The repercussions of this war and the reconstruction that followed it are important factors in the human migration problem now confronting every element of society in the United States.

Unfortunately, we are not yet able to see the end of it.

Land, Labor, Capital

Before the Civil War southern planters had all three of the major factors of agricultural production -- land, labor, and capital. After the Civil War they were without capital and their labor conditions were so upset that new relations and new procedures had to be developed. Only the land, therefore, remained as it was before the Civil War and its fertility had declined. Slave labor which had been the property of the owners and attached to their land was free. The Civil War had changed the status of this slave labor to tenants and sharecroppers, a fact not now fully appreciated.

With the South financially prostrate, Southern farmers were forced to go elsewhere to get money to operate. It came from eastern money markets at a high rate of interest and with a requirement that the borrower produce a crop which could be converted into cash at the end of the year with which to pay the debt. This tied southern farmers to a cotton economy from which many thousands have not yet been able to free themselves. It created the condition in which supply merchants and other factors developed. And they, too, have gone down because they were a part of an unsound economy.

As the sharecropper system developed around cotton the poorer farmers, both white and colored, were engaged in a losing battle. Many owners became renters and sharecroppers. Unfavorable price conditions, high interest rates, soil erosion, and unbalanced farming were all important factors in this.

Growth of Tenancy

By decades we present the farm tenancy score in Alabama on a total and a percentage basis as follows:

<u>Year</u>	<u>No. Tenants (Alabama)</u>	<u>Percent</u>
1880	63,649	46.8
1890	76,631	48.6
1900	128,874	57.7
1910	158,326	60.2
1920	148,269	57.9
1930	166,420	64.7
1935	176,247	64.5

Cotton Moves West

During most of this time there had been, as above stated, migration from the cotton lands east of the Mississippi River to new lands west of this river. Immediately following the Civil War a good many southern planters emigrated to Brazil, Mexico, and Cuba to engage in cotton production with slave labor and to escape the rigors of reconstruction. This migration from east to west is revealed by the shift in cotton production from east to west as follows:

East of Mississippi River: 66 per cent in 1890; 61 percent in 1910; 53 percent in 1920; and 44 percent in 1938.

Bales east of River: 3,765,000 in 1880; 6,533,000 in 1910; 6,045,000 in 1920; and 5,201,000 in 1938.

The Negro Exodus was Economic

All these movements and factors were in operation up to the World War of 1914-1918; in fact they are still in force. Immediately before, during, and after the World War and until 1929, industrial expansion and operation in the North and East drew heavily upon farm labor in Alabama and other

Especially was this true of southern Negroes who left the farms for industries " Up Nawth" between the "teens" and the late twenties. This we define as an economic and social movement -- an opportunity for men of the southern soils to find more lucrative employment and social conditions which to them were more attractive than what they had at home.

Writing in The Review of Reviews for October, 1923, on the Negro exodus I pointed out that its main cause was economic, or "Stated in another way, it is due largely to low returns for labor on southern farms and high returns for labor in industrial centers."

Official statistics were cited showing that labor in the glass, steel, packing, and automobile industries received then \$4.30 to \$6.50 per day against less than \$1.00 per day for Negroes on southern farms. Obviously, it was not difficult to understand, therefore, why 324,000 Negroes moved from farms to towns in 1922, and why the annual movement of Negroes from farms to towns from 1916 to 1922 averaged some 200,000 against an average of 10,000 or 12,000 annually from the close of the Civil War to 1916. It continued after 1922 but at a reduced rate.

After-War Adjustments

Immediately after the World War when farm migration to industrial urban centers was running high and when national prosperity appeared to be soaring ~~the~~ farmer conditions were becoming more difficult. Powerful forces were working against them. The American tariff structure, for example, had raised prices of products bought by southern farmers to much higher levels and actually lowered the price of cotton, the main cash crop of the South.

The United States had changed from a debtor to a creditor nation. No longer was this nation engaged in borrowing money abroad and paying it with cotton and other farm products. Instead of borrowing we were lending.

European nations that had been engaged in war were less able to buy and they were also producing more cotton and competitive products for their own needs. The use of synthetic fiber was born. It soon grew into a substantial volume with present prospects of continued growth.

New lands which farmers had brought into crops during the war under the patriotic urge to produce feed and fiber as essentials to victory and world safety for democracy were not needed after the war. All these and other factors brought the nation to the collapse of 1929 and the years that followed.

The great collapse, let me remind you, brought the American people face to face for the first time with tremendous economic distress and human misery in the midst of an abundance of materials which people need most. As economists see it the nation was suffering because it had produced too much of what it needed for abundant living, security, and safety.

In this, of course, there are many factors which could be discussed but time does not permit. So I come back to farm migration of the present.

Current Migrant Objectives

Modern migrants seek to improve their position as did pioneer migrants, but the chances of improvement are impressively less. Their goal is not settlement, but employment and wages. Their migration is a career, not a step toward improved settlement or from one farm to a better farm. Settlement is almost out of the question. The differences between settlement and wages, between stepping stones and career, are outstanding contrasts between the old and the new.

As previously stated, the chief cause of the present day movement is insecurity or a complete lack of security, both social and economic. By social security I mean security of tenure; by economic security I mean

sufficient income to feel some degree of security against hunger and a lack of clothing and shelter. Only by studying the causes can we analyze the movements.

Social insecurity, or insecurity of tenure, is probably the chief cause of movement. Poverty creates a psychological urge to move; and insecurity or lack of tenure gives the excuse or reason for undertaking migration. If we are to reduce the number of migratory farmers or keep their number from increasing, their social and economic position must be improved. In this both the individual and society as a whole have duties and responsibilities.

Tenure is the legal relationship of man to land. Ownership implies permanent tenure while leases - oral or written - yield possession only for a certain period of time. There is, however, more to tenure than legal possession. A tenant farmer may have legal tenure but be quite insecure. If he does not know whether or not he can have possession of the farm for another year or several years, the possibility of having to move is about as costly as the movement itself. There can be, to illustrate, little or no livestock, perennial hay or pasture building, or other improvements. Those farm enterprises which tie one to a farm, which require continued occupation and security of tenure, are conspicuously absent. Even a live-at-home program which contributed much toward economic security is most difficult with insecure tenure.

Length of residence, however, bears no definite relationship to security of tenure. A tenant may have lived on a farm for a number of years, but if he has not known from one year to the next whether or not he would operate the farm for the coming year, then his farming practices and attitudes can be little different from those of a one-year tenant.

Written leases (which only about 10 percent of Alabama tenants have)

will go far toward bringing about a greater security. It is perhaps the first step, but an understanding between landlord and tenant of their mutual problems is necessary for security. This understanding requires more than a division of crops, income, and expenses. It requires a knowledge of conservation, cropping practices, livestock management, food and feed production, etc. Each must understand and appreciate the other's position; and the relations of one to the other.

These tenants and croppers, who constitute sixty-five percent of the farmers of Alabama, are a potential source of migratory farmers or farm laborers. Unless we can tie them to their farms more securely with livestock, soil building, and soil conserving crops, plus better-balanced and more-profitable farming we have not checked the source of this migration.

Educational Work in Progress

The Extension Service is trying to solve the problems of migrating farmers by checking migration at its source. Our plan of approach is to increase the social and economic welfare of those who might otherwise become migrants. We have not been unmindful of tenure. Our approach may be less spectacular than a written lease, yet fundamentally the sounder approach. Before presenting that approach, however, let us keep in mind that the Extension Service is an educational agency, with no authority or funds ~~with which~~ to assist farmers financially.

In order for a written lease to be an effective instrument of secure tenure, it must be preceded by an understanding of mutual landlord-tenant problems as well as those peculiar to each group. This is being brought about:

- (1) Through community groups, both landlord and tenant, who come together to study the latest methods of production and marketing;

(2) By method and result demonstrations where practices can be observed;

(3) Through livestock, tenants, landlords, and bankers are brought together in mutual interest. Livestock necessitates secure tenure if loans are sound and if the enterprise rests upon an efficient basis;

(4) Through an educational program directed toward both human and soil conservation, - both of which require security of tenure;

(5) Through assistance by county agents and specialists in making leases, both written and oral, which will permit conservation in the widest sense of the word, and result in a greater security of tenure.

Understanding is Paramount

We, in the Extension Service, do not minimize the importance of written leases, rather do we operate on the theory that a lease must be preceded by understanding and a sound farm program if it is to operate effectively. A written lease merely gives rise to opportunities. Those opportunities can't be taken advantage of unless the information is at hand to guide its use.

The second phase of the problem is economic security. If farmers are clothed, housed, and fed on a farm where there is security of tenure, they are not likely to become migratory workers. A farmer may be poor and yet be reasonably secure. Our pioneer forefathers had less money than the majority of our low-income farmers today. Their hardships were much grater; yet they felt a keen sense of security in their freedom and upon their land.

There is a limit to money income below which it is socially dangerous for farmers to live. But where a farmer produces his food and feed, and reduces his cash expenditures to those things which he cannot produce himself, there is no high degree of correlation between standard of living and money income. Cash income is difficult to increase. Real or non-money

income is capable of considerable expansion.

The Extension Service is striving to improve the well-being of the farm families not merely by increasing cash income but likewise by improving their real income through the live-at-home program. Briefly this program is as follows:

- (a) Home gardens and orchards
- (b) Food preservation
- (c) Feed and forage production
- (d) Seed saving.

This live-at-home program is part of a bigger program based upon wise use of all land a farmer has and efficient use of all his labor throughout the year, plus profitable use of money.

At the outset I mentioned that increases in population and changes in farm organization released certain people from farms. The high birth rate of the South is well known. We have been a source of population not only for migratory farm laborers in the West but for business men and industrial workers in the North and East. This movement, or migration because of population increases, is natural. There is little we could or should do about it.

Farm Changes Important

There have been changes in farm organization, however, which have released many farmers from their former holdings. Change from intensive cotton culture to more extensive types of farming, such as beef cattle production, has released many families. Mechanization of farms has required the labor of fewer people. In most cases these displaced tenants and croppers have been retained as wage laborers, but there are many instances in which they had to leave the farm. An Alabama farmer told me recently that he had

reduced his labor from 30 to 10 and that these 20 migrants went to WPA.

Changes in farm organization are due to the influence of economic factors over which we have little control. Mechanization and technological progress cannot be halted because they are labor saving. We must reckon with these facts realistically.

One of our county agents in the Black belt stated recently: "Since dairying does not displace tenants from the farm as rapidly as beef cattle production does, we feel that more of our people can be more adequately supported with dairying than with beef production." While we encourage both economic and technological progress, we try to direct that progress to improvement of as many people as possible.

In one area of Alabama there is now a considerable push for beef cattle of which no sane man questions the value. But we must be intelligent enough to realize that beef cattle farming requires relatively little labor. If, therefore, the movement advances to the point of big displacement of labor many new migrants will be created and the towns in this area will suffer more than the farms because there will be fewer people around these towns.

Comfortable Homes Essential

It is a fact that migration does not always begin at the insistence of the farmer. Farm women have felt the oppression and bleakness of small homes, lack of facilities, crowding of families into a few rooms, and poor health conditions of tenant houses. Through home demonstration clubs many of these women are taught how to improve their homes, - to make them more attractive, more comfortable and more adequate. These women have been taught how to make mattresses, studio couches, extra beds and other comforts. Through home beautification programs many of the homes have been landscaped with native shrubs and plants. The food budget and plans for feeding the

family an adequate and balanced diet have aided in improving family health. When homes are made more attractive inside and out and when adequate food is provided, a sense of security is instilled into the family which does not beget migration.

To give us a better understanding of the problem under discussion I call attention to the fact that the current birth rate in cities is only 80 percent of enough to maintain city population. Yet our cities at the present rate of production and consumption are producing all the urban products that we need. They can produce more with only a small labor addition from the farms of the nation.

Our farm birth rate is 150 percent of enough to maintain farm population. Here in Alabama and elsewhere in the Southeast we already have a congested population in relation to land and opportunities. The cropland per farm person in Alabama is 6 acres as compared to 23 acres in Iowa, 24.7 acres in Illinois, 19.5 acres in Texas, and 70.3 acres in North Dakota.

The best information available indicates that the total cropland in the Southeast is about the same as it was in 1860, the year before the Civil War began. The number of people on this same land is approximately twice what it was then.

It is obvious, therefore, that we need more opportunities for human beings in the rural areas of Alabama and all other southern states. During the decade of the twenties when industry appeared to be thriving and agriculture was sinking deeper into despondency and distress, between three and four million southern farm youths moved to industrial centers, largely North and East. While no official figures are available for the decade of the thirties, all information ^{at} ~~on~~ hand indicates that the exodus was much less because industrial opportunities in cities were not available. This has

resulted in impounding several million people on farms who would be elsewhere if business conditions had continued as they were in the early twenties.

Vital Economic Facts

To throw more light upon the forces behind distressing farm migration I cite the following facts:

(1) Cotton producers are now receiving about $1\frac{1}{2}$ percent of the national income, including government payments, against three percent before the World War, 1909-14.

(2) The ratio of prices received by farmers to prices they pay is 77. Stated differently, prices of agricultural products are now 95 percent of the pre-war level, while prices paid by farmers for commodities used in living and in farming were 123 percent in June, 1940 of 1909-14.

(3) Compared with the above prices and ratios wages are more than 200 percent of the pre-war level.

It is my mature judgment that if we can correct these inequalities and lift agricultural income to the level of full parity, practically all of the social and economic problems arising from farm migration will be solved. This adjustment will be helpful to all people engaged in worthwhile occupations other than farming. It is, therefore, a national need for society as a whole, the same as it is for farmers as a group.

Stated a little differently the best way to treat the problem of rural migration is to remove the causes by making it more profitable and more desirable to stay on farms. Long time contracts and other facts which we have mentioned are desirable and we support them but we also recognize the responsibility of intelligent education to accompany or precede changes.

It is obvious that when we reach the goal of economic and social security, Alabama will not be a source of migratory destitute farmers.